

Hartford Seminary Foundation

Hartford Theological Seminary
Hartford School of Religious Education
Kennedy School of Missions



The Inaugural Address by

PRESIDENT RUSSELL HENRY STAFFORD

M.A., D.D., S.T.D., LL.D.

January 25, 1946

Hartford, Connecticut

1946

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

TO come over from parish into college administration, even within the Christian ministry, is a radical change of occupation. It is such a step as no thoughtful man would be likely to take unless he were moved by strong conviction. A strong conviction naturally engenders the courage to act upon it.

But in this instance courage must needs be tempered with diffidence. For teachers in graduate schools are productive scholars. On the other hand, if by courtesy a parish minister who has not neglected his duties can ever be called a scholar, it is only in that distributive sense which means knowing a little about a good many things and not much about anything. Such scholarship hardly goes beyond a sort of bookishness. When a merely bookish man finds himself brought into close relationship with the sort of men who write the books he knows he needs to read, he would be more or less than human not to feel embarrassed.

This embarrassment has in my instance been mitigated, however, by the generosity and modesty of the scholars upon whom I have been thrust through coming to the Hartford Seminary Foundation as its President. They have welcomed me with every evidence of kindness and understanding. I look forward to being their pupil as well as their comrade. So I approach these novel duties reassured by the warmth of my reception.

I suppose the function of an administrator is continually to survey the total enterprise under his oversight, in order to align all its elements in due proportion and hold them to that alignment; to help define farther objectives; and to suggest how they can be effectively pursued. So perhaps a new President ought in his first public statement to sketch the picture as he now sees it, and hazard a tentative judgment as to what should lie beyond. And frankly I would rather speak now within this limited frame of local

reference, than address myself to the general problems of religion in modern society, upon which I cannot feel that I have any special wisdom.

First, then, by way of describing this frame of reference, the Hartford Seminary Foundation lives by itself. It is not linked with any great centre of general learning. That may be an advantage or a disadvantage, depending upon cases.

On the balance we believe it to be an advantage. For most students preparing a religious vocation, though not for all, it is doubtless preferable, after they have spent their undergraduate years in surroundings mainly secular, to withdraw from the world, as it were, in order to see it in relief and in the large; while at the same time living not too far from the world, and in an atmosphere saturated with constructive influences, against the day of their return to the tensions and confusions of the age.

There is a rhythm of withdrawal and return in all fruitful living, personal and social. On the biological level, this rhythm is illustrated by sleep and waking; at the highest level of consciousness, by prayer and action. In both sleep and prayer, the calm is dynamic.

Ours is not, I trust, a sleepy campus. But it is a prayerful campus. It is not a place for grappling at first hand with the world. It is a place for viewing it in perspective, and storing up powers to meet it manfully afterward.

To be sure, this comparative seclusion imposes upon the teaching corps a special duty of maintaining standards rigorously. For we are removed from immediate comparison with other colleges in which achievement is intrinsically more amenable to exact measurement. But this is a responsibility to which our faculties are alert. I have heard so far no whisper of student complaint that courses here are too easy. And the hollow sound of the flunk is not seldom heard in this land.

Second, we are a small company here. That is generally true of schools like ours; and by deliberate choice. Religion cannot be taught wholesale, like such disciplines as history and the natural sciences. It belongs rather with the fine arts, in which quantity of students is apt to be in inverse proportion to quality of results. Indeed religion is itself the finest of arts. True art is never that meretricious adornment of the practical with which the vulgar confound it, but the subtlest functioning of the human spirit in converse with the timeless phases of being. No art of handling colour or line or tone or word as a medium of personal meaning can be imparted by mass instruction. For, no matter how definite and intricate its techniques, without the spirit the techniques of any art are dead; and the spirit must be caught by infection, at close quarters. In conformity with this principle, we regard about seventy-five as the optimum number of students in each of the three colleges of this Foundation. A small company we are and will remain, because our concern with quality must not be subordinated to quantity production.

Third, we are a Christian company. The three faculties and their students are drawn from many branches of the Church. There is a fellowship here that is deeper and broader than any particular bond within the supreme loyalty to One Lord. It is a fellowship which cannot be described. It must be felt. We all feel it. It is of the spirit. The spirit can never be put into the letter without remainder. This spirit pervades the campus and all its activities. It springs, we believe, from that vital commitment to Our Lord Jesus Christ and his way of life which makes the difference between Christians and pagans.

A fourth remark can be better put in a question than in a statement. Are we a group of vocational schools? To that the answer seems to be both yes and no. We are a group of schools designed to prepare men and women for the ministry, religious education, and missions. Yet these are

not primarily training schools; that is, schools of methods. Though methods in general are studied here for their suggestiveness, yet we are convinced that the right methods in particular for any practitioner of these arts will be those which he validates, or it may even be invents, for himself, through the interplay of his personality and purpose with the people and circumstances he confronts. So we seek here the awakening of the whole man to the wide ranges of his field through free pursuit of truth, with a vocational orientation as a sort of ground tone in this pursuit rather than with a vocational aim as the dominant theme.

I have claimed that we are a Christian company, yet I have added that the free pursuit of truth is our purpose. Can Christians pursue truth, as if they were not already in possession of it? Here again the answer would seem to be both yes and no. Clearly in such an institution as this certain things are taken for granted as to the general nature of the truth remaining to be found. But there are presuppositions in every pursuit of truth. There is no such thing anywhere as a completely unbiassed mind. In schools of this sort we can at least claim that we recognize our basic assumptions for what they are.

The presuppositions which colour the free pursuit of truth on our campus are, I take it, God, Christ and the Church. Awareness of God means paying attention to a factor of experience inevitably present whenever anyone indulges in a simple declarative sentence on any subject. God does not mean an Old Man in the sky. When thoughtful men say God, whatever they may further intend, their primary intention is to denote that rational structure of being which must be assumed even in order to deny it with the expectation that the denial will have meaning. The rational structure of being is described only in its lowest terms when we posit mathematics and logic as universal subsistents. In higher terms to which these lead, it stands for the system by virtue of which meaning and purpose in

man are not isolated, but are geared in with meaning and purpose in the whole of which man is a part.

To repudiate that correlation is to assert that man is discontinuous with the universe which produces him,—a greater miracle than religion has ever put forward. To admit that correlation, on the other hand, is to accept in principle the organic concept of being, with one conscious and active mind pervading all, much as the mind of man pervades man's body, so that this mind is both immanent and transcendent. That the universe, existing independently of our recognition, has some such unity, not less but more comprehensive than our own complex constitution, so that the constructs of science are not human inventions thrust upon chaos, but correspond substantially with reality, seems to us to be as much the presupposition of every laboratory as of any chapel; though in the laboratory it may be so naïvely assumed that it is cheated of recognition for lack of scrutiny. By acknowledging it here and calling it God, and by living in the awareness of Him while we seek to look farther into His nature, we believe that we are not less but more honest than seekers for truth who have not thought through what their very thinking implies.

Second, by naming Christ among our presuppositions I mean no special theory as to the man Jesus; but rather that personal attitude toward him which, however it may be defined, warms up the percept of God given in all rational interaction with the world of experience, so that God becomes in our feeling one whom we know, and cannot but love and trust. Doubtless many men with a vocation to sainthood have penetrated to trustful intimacy with God apart from acquaintance with Jesus Christ. God has not left Himself anywhere without witness. Yet it is normal to come to know God, as a reality in vivid concourse, through this man, who is felt to be such an index figure that when we look at him we see what God is like in character.

We are not much concerned here with verbal orthodoxies. Words are treacherous counters. But we are deeply concerned to hold Jesus Christ enshrined in a sort of hero-worship, if I may invoke so inadequate an analogy,—an heroic personal veneration which carries us beyond ourselves into new dimensions of the awareness of God and new powers for living in harmony with Him.

Third, by the Church I do not mean any one concrete type of Christian society, nor the aggregate of such concrete societies in time and space. Unless there be ill will involved in place of charity, we are not inclined here to deplore denominationalism; that is, the co-existence of a variety of orders of Christian thought and practice, each with its own appropriate form of organization. It seems likely, to be sure, that there have come to be many more denominations than there is any need for. It is a clear triumph of common sense and business efficiency when two or more denominations virtually all but name together into one. But their limits just as clear, and suppose, to the desirability of such amalgamations. As there are different temperaments and contrasting points of view among Christians,—that is, as long as we Christians are earth-bound as well as heaven-born,—it would seem better that there should be different households for different groups, defined more or less by mind-types, to live in, within the same friendly community. We are not enamoured here of that artificial unity which some seek through eventual combination of all the Churches into one Church organization. Since such a project must concern itself first with the mechanics of polity, cultus and creed, there is a taint in it of that idolatry of the machine versus loyalty to the spirit for which Henry Adams discovered the classic figure in his picturesque contrast of the Virgin and the dynamo.

Apart, then, from minor combinations for obvious convenience, and over the wide range of Church life, organiza-

divine idea, that each of us has come to the knowledge of God in Christ. It is a reasonable inference that only by means of this kind of fellowship will the borders of Christ's Kingdom be eventually broadened until the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord.

So we are not much concerned here to enquire which Church a man belongs to. But we are deeply concerned that through that Church, as one unit in the Church Universal already existent, he shall be enhancing the persuasiveness of worldwide Christian witness.

These, then, are the premises of our pursuit of truth: God, Christ, the Church. These are the stars by which we set our course. But there remains everything to learn about the sky and the other stars, and about the earth which we traverse under them. And here lies the warranty for our claim that we pursue truth with open mind; namely, in that we accept nothing as true upon the sole guarantee of official certification, but proceed by induction from ascertained facts toward hypotheses which must be regarded as hazardous until they have stood up under thorough testing. The function of scripture and tradition in this context is simply that of teaching in the context of the natural sciences,—that is, to suggest directions of enquiry and methods that have heretofore proved fruitful, subject to experimental verification.

In principal we differ from Catholics, who proceed by deduction from pronouncements of a bishop or of a convention of bishops, and from Protestant literalists, who proceed by deduction from pronouncements of a book held to be inerrant in every detail. We do not believe that any word ever spoken by any one on any subject can be rightly taken as the last word on that subject unless and until we have satisfied ourselves that it still stands true, as it doubtless seemed to be to him who first spoke it.

The only authority we acknowledge is the authority of the expert, regardless of his official standing. And it is

characteristic of the expert in any field that he claims no authority save that of fidelity to the real, which his pupils are both as free and as able as he was in the first instance to see for themselves if they will examine thoroughly the pertinent facts. If an expert of yesterday appear less expert today in the light of knowledge which we have and he had not, then with regard to the point in question we will set his dictum aside, in the conviction that by so doing we are being more loyal to his spirit than if we adhered blindly to what he once said because he said it, though doubtless if he were standing where we stand now he would correct that statement, as we feel ourselves constrained to do.

This, I take it, is what religious liberalism properly means,—a general way of approaching truth rather than any particular body of opinion marking some stage of that way. In this sense, we are liberals here. Such liberalism involves no disloyalty to the great preceptors of the faith in times past, as our minds meet theirs through the Bible and subsequent source documents of the developing Christian consciousness. Rather it necessitates the most sympathetic approach to them in order to find out exactly what they meant,—what the words they used meant in their day, and how the concepts they evolved were related to the thought-circle of their contemporaries. For as Christians we are heirs of an historic tradition, from which we look for guidance, though to it we will acknowledge no bondage. More often than not, when due regard is thus paid to changes of verbal and philosophical idiom, and the requisite translation into the idiom now current is skilfully executed, we are surprised to find ourselves more deeply in agreement with ancient teachers than those can be who echo their syllables without troubling to enter into their points of view. Thus paradoxically it turns out that liberalism, as we practise it here, is essentially conservative.

Here, then, we are,—a little company of masters and disciples, seeking truth together in the spirit of Christ, which

is liberty. We are a little transient Church, so to speak, made up of members from many Churches. The constitutive element of this transient Church, as of all true Churches, is that worship of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom. And the characteristic activity of the true Church, in worldwide service for good will among men and the greater glory of God, is present here in its initial phase of careful preparation. We are a little world placed over against the great world as a refuge and a lighthouse and a dynamo. For the life lived here by successive generations of students and teachers is not ingrowing but outgoing. Its centre is small and secluded; but its periphery is the whole earth. Into all regions our sons and daughters go forth to carry the light that has flamed here. And now and again they come back to us on a homeward voyage of rest and refreshment. By this going and coming they keep us tied in with the farthest corners of this land and the remotest tribes of men. It is a good thing to be in a little place, when that little place is a centre of the world.

Much remains to be done before this Foundation measures up to the full dimensions of its task. We need more buildings, of course, and more endowed chairs, and more general endowment: was there ever a seat of learning that did not? We need to add a School of Social Work; not only because such a school was foreseen in the creative dream of President Mackenzie thirty-five years ago, but also because this feature of his dream corresponds notably with subsequent developments in parish administration. No Church confronting a complex urban situation, as most large Churches in America now do, can have a complete program without a trained social worker, on a like footing with the Director of Religious Education, on its staff. And no social worker can be considered properly prepared for Church appointment on a basis of mere training in social techniques, apart from an acquaintance more than casual with the Christian doctrine of God and man, and the resultant personal motivation.

I am apprehensive lest any estimate I may make of needs at this juncture fall short of the full measure as I shall see it more comprehensively in due course. But at a rough guess I should suppose that about two million dollars more are required,—not much more and certainly not much less,—to equip this institution economically for the entire service it ought to be rendering. I have no idea now from what sources that sum will come. But I am sure that it will come, if, as I believe, we really need it. For the sort of thing we do here, and the way in which we go about doing it, have such an appeal to believers in God, Christ, and the Church, that those who are able to be generous will respond when they hear it.

I do not believe that such appeals should be voiced apologetically. For it is not money that is sought for money's sake. It is money to be dedicated for the sake of God and man in a difficult time, as a concrete and potent expression of loyalty to the Christian faith in the infinite value of every man, and to the Christian ethic of world brotherhood which is founded on that faith.

I have called this a difficult time. But every time is a difficult time. We are probably correct in judging that ours is one of the pivotal epochs of history. Yet pivotal epochs are perhaps not more difficult,—they are more tragic but also more interesting, and therefore less dreary,—than the passages of time in which things seem to stand still in a stalemate. Time itself is by its very texture resistant to penetration by the light of eternity. That is our Christian task,—to pierce a passage for star-beams through the close mesh of time-space, that the peoples who sit in darkness may see a great light.

To this task we give ourselves here. If there is help we need that others can yield, we are confident that we shall receive it. Our immediate responsibility is to keep in contact with the Source of all power and truth, that His truth and His power may by all means radiate into the lives of

our students, and through them may touch with healing and bring to deliverance the faint and the benighted everywhere.

To that responsibility and its due discharge this Foundation has from the first been dedicated without reserve. I venture to hope that the inauguration today of another President in a long and honourable succession is coming home to all members and friends of the Hartford Seminary Foundation as an occasion for reaffirming that dedication, and going forward with enhanced faith and vigour to master the problems and fulfill the opportunities of a new day.

RUSSELL HENRY STAFFORD

BORN at Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, April 4, 1890; son of Charles Mason and Jennie T. (Russell) Stafford. Student University of California; B.A., University of Minnesota, 1912; M.A., New York University, 1915; B.D., Drew Theological Seminary, 1915; D.D., Chicago Theological Seminary, 1924, Colby College, 1931; LL.D., Oglethorpe University, 1929; S.T.D., Columbia University, 1934. Married Lillian Mae Crist of Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 23, 1921; children—Anne, Thomas Russell. Assistant Pastor Central Congregational Church, Brooklyn, N. Y., 1912-15; ordained Congregational ministry, 1914; Pastor Open Door Congregational Church, Minneapolis, 1915-19, 1st Congregational Church, Minneapolis, 1919-23, Pilgrim Congregational Church, St. Louis, 1923-27; Minister of the Old South Church in Boston, 1927-1945; President of the Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1945—. Served as 1st Lt. chaplain U.S.A., 1918; same grade O.R.C., 1919-24. Trustee Drury College, Anatolia College (chairman board of trustees), Piedmont College, Emerson College (chairman board of trustees). President of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1940—. Member Society of Mayflower Descendants, Society of Colonial Wars, Sons of American Revolution, Society of the War of 1812, Delta Upsilon Fraternity; Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Clubs: University (Boston); Authors' (London), Harvard Faculty (Cambridge, Mass.), University (Hartford). Author:

Finding God, 1923; Christian Humanism, 1928; Religion Meets the Modern Mind, 1934; A Religion for Democracy, 1938.

The formal Inauguration of President Russell Henry Stafford took place on Friday, January 25, 1946, President Stafford having taken office on November 1, 1945. More than 150 institutions of higher learning and a large number of religious bodies were officially represented on this occasion, their delegates participating in the academic procession.

After a luncheon for the delegates at noon in Hosmer Hall, the ceremony was conducted in the Asylum Hill Congregational Church, beginning at 2:30 p. m. Professor E. Jerome Johanson served as Marshal. The program included parts by the former President, Dr. Robbins Wolcott Barstow; the Executive Vice-President of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (of which Dr. Stafford is President), Dr. Fred Field Goodsell; the President of Drew University, Dr. Arlo Ayres Brown; the President of the Board of Trustees, Berkeley Cox, Esq.; and Dean Emeritus Rockwell Harmon Potter.

The ceremony was followed by a largely attended general reception in Mackenzie Hall, from four until half-past five o'clock, and by a dinner of two hundred seventy-five covers at seven o'clock at the Hartford Club, at which brief addresses were made by the Deans and a number of alumni and friends of the Foundation.

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